

A Serial of Instruction Inviting Grave Research.
No. 12.

What is this Annual Meeting that hath grown so great? Whence its authority? The early Christians had none, our church fathers had none. Another significant fact: the purest period of every church's history was when it had no Annual Meeting. And still another very significant fact is, that the longer any religious organization fosters an Annual Meeting for law-making purposes, and the more importance she attaches to it, the more carnal, corrupt, and tyrannical she becomes, as the Roman Catholic and German Baptist organizations fully illustrate. It seems to be an all-prevailing principle that church machinery as manufactured in Council meetings, work Christ right out of the Church, and out of the hearts of the membership in every single instance.

"The Annual Meeting." The name from long and thoughtless association, has grown sacred. But what is it? There is nothing sacred about it. It is a voluntary concern and is no more authorized by any Gospel, direct or indirect, than a barn-raising.

The men and women that constitute it, are no more inspired than so many visitors to an exposition of art. Henry Davy was once the moving spirit of Annual Meeting, now it is some one else.

There are, however, many who look upon Annual Meeting as a sacred institution; what it decides they consider to be as sacred and binding as though God spake. The greatest of care has been taken to educate the masses of people up to, or down to Annual Meeting as a thing at once sacred and as essential as the Gospel itself. You will hear them say, "Why, the Annual Meeting says so." That is sufficient. If a brother or sister commits a sin, the first question is, "what does the Annual Meeting say?"

The Annual Meeting makes customs and usages. Holsinger opposed those customs and usages, and was expelled without a trial, which was a *breach* of those same customs and usages than *he* was charged with. The committee sinned worse than Henry did, if it be sin to violate the customs and usages. The whole trick of that committee in forcing Berlin church to assume what they never agreed to, was not only flagrant *treachery*, but a sin against the usages of the church. If the Berlin church had voluntarily agreed to assume all that Johnny Wise had forced upon them, he had no more right to *allow* it, even, than he had to allow an open council and a stenographer. In order to expel Holsinger for violating Annual Meeting usages, the committee violated them every whit as much as Holsinger was ever charged with. This alone proves that the men prating loudest for customs and usages are infidel to them whenever it suits them, and that they only made them originally for self-aggrandizement. The German Baptist church to-day can sue at law uncensured, with fourteen statutes prohibiting it, and take what does not belong to them through an exigency of law, not justice. I repeat that the men most helpful in making the laws of Annual Meeting, are least sincere in the matter. The author of the "Doctrine of the Brethren Defended" fellowshipped sisters that wore hats, and granted two of them church letters within three months after the famous decision against hats in 1881. His name was written on those letters with his own hand and in his peculiar chirography, and that too with his full knowledge of the fact that they wore hats, for they wore them openly on the streets and in church.

But what is Annual Meeting? A gathering of brethren, sisters, and strangers. They are no wiser, no better, no purer for coming together. All the appointments, such as tent, seats, boarding house, lunch stand, and provisions certainly are commonplace. There is nothing striking about it, nothing sacred, nothing authorized by the Gospel, and nothing essential to salvation.

The Standing Committee have a private room wherein they caucus and do all the business. When it is done and everything *settled*, the matters are presented to the general Conference, and the young orators allowed to ventilate their lungs and parliamentary sagacity, and then it "passes."

But all the passing, tabling, etc., is done in advance, and the public exercises are a diversion; purely so.

I can select six of the "leading brethren" of your church and defy the whole Brotherhood. Allow me to refer you to the ratification of the Berlin Committee report; and yet, said committee only contained three of the six I should choose. But you say, Holsinger ought to be expelled. Very well, that's because you are angry; and that is a part of this committee's tactics to make you think so. In that way they got your votes and hold your sympathy. But think over it calmly and for yourself, just for once. If that committee had allowed open doors and a reporter, you would have said *amen!* The difference would have been just where the reporting innovation was. When Holsinger rejected the proceedings of Annual Meeting, it was *wrong*; but when Quinter did it, it was all right. When Holsinger printed a tune and hymn book, it was wrong and its use forbidden; but when Quinter printed a tune and hymn book, it was all right and encouraged, and thereby Holsinger furnished the brains and took the censure of Annual Meeting, while Quinter made the money and accepted the good will of the same Annual Meeting. This Annual Meeting is a very flexible affair. Whatever the leading brethren agree upon, gives it complexion. When they are dead and gone, and the aspiring underlings come upon the arena for chieftainship, there will be still less reason to argue about the sacred character of Annual Meeting.

Personally, I am convinced that Annual Meeting is a huge speculation, not in stocks and profits but in "influence." I do not feel condemned when I say it, for every external and internal manifestation that strikes the unprejudiced eye, condemns Annual Meeting as a huge speculation in personal greatness.

When the very chiefest among the leaders joke about the "gum-elastic views" that one must take of some of its work, together with sundry personal observations, convinces us that the institution lacks sincerity most where the brains are supposed to be located. The supporters are dupes. Any other body of men and women of equal size, could work just as well.

That God or the Holy Spirit has anything whatever to do with Annual Meeting, more than any other meeting, is ridiculous, if not sinful doctrine.

Take duplicate queries, thirty in number, and divide Annual Meeting into two bodies, thoroughly independent of each other, and for the sake of a reasonable illustration, allow those thirty queries to be new ones instead of the meatless bones of the last century, and the lack of harmony would be marvelous. Destroy the minutes of Annual Meeting, and the present generation will not make another set of them. Destroy every minute, and salvation would be just as full and free as when Peter preached and John wrote. *Abandon* Annual Meeting, and the Cause of Christ would not have a fetter, but a good many elders in your church would have to stand upon their merits, which would diminish their size, materially.

Annual Meeting made laws, the laws being inconsistent, made trouble, the troubles becoming great, made enemies, the enemies centralized their influence and assumed authority to excommunicate all who would not bow the knee to *them* and their *opinions*, and that caused division.

This Annual Meeting is a wonderful thing. Here is an example, and not an impossible one. A church of one hundred members has two preachers. The one preaches Christ, the other Annual Meeting. Both are in full fellowship, and on Friday each baptizes six of the twelve applicants for membership. Friday evening, the preacher of Christ, being an old and cherished friend of brother D. who was expelled the week before for saying in private and public that Annual Meeting was drifting into Popery, meets brother D. and salutes him. Saturday being the regular council, the A. M. preacher who witnessed the kissing, brings a charge against his brother, who will not make a confession because he feels that he has a right to

exercise his own taste in kissing. Sunday the preacher of Christ baptizes a humble penitent. You dare not recognize this last baptism. He or she must be rebaptized. It was not baptism at all. It was illegal. Why? because the preacher was expelled. You may recognize the six he baptized on Friday, but the one he baptized on Sunday must be rebaptized. Why so? Because the minister kissed brother D. She or he must be rebaptized because the officiating minister kissed a friend who had spoken reproachfully against a certain gathering of German Baptists. Both those ministers and the last one baptized, are aliens and strangers to Israel, because they offended a certain gathering of German Baptists, and the crowd was large because the fare was low.

What is Annual Meeting that an offense against her is punishable with loss of heaven? Heaven has nothing to do with Annual Meeting, and the law of God does not even mention it. Annual Meeting is a human concern, just as selfish, meddlesome, jealous, peevish, revengeful and unmerciful, as the men that make and run it. It is as purely human as a county fair, only run in different interests. It is run by a very small number of men, and they virtually say to you, If you write, teach, or preach reproachfully against *our opinions*, we will not allow you to go to heaven. It is just about that simple. Slaves and Serfs might relish it, but *men*—never. It is an insult to a manly man. What an idea to support! Two or three thousand men and women, all very commonplace at home, but because low railroad rates has brought them together at one place, they suddenly become so great that they assume to offer God's property as rewards and penalties. Make customs and usages and offer heaven as a premium for their acceptance and hell as the penalty of their infringement. The fact is, they have nothing to do with heaven or hell to thus dispose of them as personal property. It is sacrilegious. It is profane. If the Church did not hold that all outside of its organization, are eternally lost, it would be different. But kissing a friend, wearing a mustache, wearing a hat by a lady, have each and all, consigned scores beyond the pales of the German Baptist church, and unto consequent damnation. But the Gospel says nothing about German Baptists. Nowhere is it remotely intimated, even, that said church holds a special agency, and is empowered to grant pardons and forfeitures. I, for one, should be very sorry if the mind, love, mercy, and attributes of God were even remotely reflected by any Annual Meeting I have ever witnessed. My idea of God and all connected with God is on a vastly higher plane than anything ever symbolized by the loftiest attainments of Annual Meeting.

But Annual Meeting is great through association. It was made so purposely. Thousands go there and feel that they are treading hallowed ground. They stand in awe of it, and gaze about bewildered by its overpowering majority. To them it is a sacred place, and to that class Annual Meeting is as potent as Almighty God.

But a sober, second thought shows up the ridiculous side. Why, those are only men and women; nothing sacred about it; no need of awe. They are just men and women from far and near, and any decision they may make is just as valid as a decision made by any other set of men and women under similar circumstances.

All this, however, is natural. The Hindoo looks upon the Ganges as sacred water, and if he can only be foul himself with the mud of its banks, he dies happy. The Mahometan looks upon Mecca as a sacred place, and a pilgrimage to it is fully as awe-inspiring to him, as a visit to Annual Meeting is to you. It is all a matter of habit, not intelligence. Then some persons hold certain pieces of carved wood or stone, even more sacred than you do your customs and usages, because their fathers had them in the family longer than *your* fathers have known the customs and usages of Annual Meeting. The principle is the same the world over.

(To be continued.)

Reflect upon your present blessings, of which every man has many; not on your past misfortunes, of which all men have some.